

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Weighing our Desires"
Dr. J. Dent

March 4, 2012
Second Sunday in Lent

Lent is a time of self-searching. We remember at Lent that much of what forms our lives are our choices, and even more, God's choices. As we get to know God, we get to know ourselves. The God who made us and knows us forms us, informs us and transforms us as we listen. We can choose anew to open ourselves to the God who holds our existence, our past, our future, our present moment. I want to begin our time again with prayer, a prayer that we might be open and listening to what God wants to say to us today. Open yourself anew to God during these few moments.

Let us pray.

Human beings have been created to worship. It is inherent to what we are. So while at this time in history, Christian liturgy, that is the form of service we are experiencing now, with prayers, Scripture, music and Sermon, seems to be waning in Canadian popular culture, nevertheless, there are many liturgies in life which human beings seek with all their hearts. It is not just church liturgies. Let me give you an extended example of one such liturgy.

Imagine for a moment, alien anthropologists visiting us, their ship having been seen by many on Thursday night. They are here to view human behavior. In the city, they are attracted to the large centers where many humans come to worship, with acres of parking for their vehicles, they come to large clusters of buildings. Pilgrims come by the hundreds and thousands every day to the site where the buildings with large atriums and verticality, huge spaces which reminds us of cathedrals and basilicas of old. The huge vertical space and openness gives a sense of sanctuary, retreat and escape. Familiar text and symbols guide the foreign faithful to identify what is inside. Inside there are maps to guide the novice through the various spiritual offerings and directions to the labyrinth of ritual observances of the pilgrims. The faithful frequenters of these places know by heart and habit-forming conviction the organization of the spaces. The architecture of this site causes you to look up and wonder at the sky, but never allows views of the outside grand expanse of black parking, guiding you to remember you are here to escape from the old and fading, to receive the new. It is a gospel powered by beauty that this place offers, inviting a new, good life, a life of

attractiveness and the life you desire. Such a life is pictured over and over again to us through our communication devices, supported by transnational causes. We reflect on the icons as we pass by hundreds of worship spaces. Sometimes we enter tentatively, wondering why we are there. Other times we think we know exactly what we want. Helpful acolytes are waiting to guide us through our experience and suggest sacred places to explore. Then the critical moment occurs when we find something from what the faithful call "the racks." We bring our newfound holy object to the altar to make it our own at the consuming moment of our worship experience. We are released by a benediction of "have a nice day." And by now you should now I am framing the experience of the mall or the outlet with liturgical language, with acknowledgement to Dr. James K A Smith, who does a much better job of this in his book *Desiring the Kingdom*, pp.19-23. (Baker Academic, 2009)

Now you may or may not relate to what you just heard, when you go to the Mall to find something to wear. Some hate going there. Some love it. The question this Lent is: Where do your desires take you? What are the liturgies of your life, and you know I am not talking about the Presbyterian Church Sunday morning liturgies? I'm talking about the ones that stir your heart, that ignite your desire. We could have easily taken a journey with our alien anthropologists to the hockey arena, for sports liturgies, to the concert hall, for musical liturgies, to the university for scientific liturgies, to the internet for pornographic liturgies, or any place your heart and desires are captured. The point is beginning to acknowledge our personal and cultural liturgies.

What you love and devote yourself to is a liturgy. What does this have to do with Abram in Genesis 17 or Jesus challenging us in Mark 9, you ask? Good questions.

Abram was finding his new identity in God, as Abraham, his new name God was giving him as he worshipped. Abraham was now to be the spiritual father of many nations, and his new name reflected that new reality. He was receiving from God an inheritance beyond what he could imagine. He had given himself to God, his future, his family, his geographical home, all his identity was now wrapped up in God. Sarah too was being called to this new relationship with God. And God calls us to follow Abraham and Sarah, to receive our identity from God, as we give God our futures, our families, our home, our possessions, our hopes, our dreams, and our desires.

Jesus was even more radical than the account of Abraham. He knew he was being called to the ultimate test of commitment to God's cause. He was ready to be tortured to death for his commitment and relationship to God. He now in chapter 8 of Mark was calling his followers to the same radical commitment.

Take up your cross and follow me. Choose to make my life and my priorities your life and your priority, Jesus says. Get your identity and life from me, so you won't have to try and make it for yourself. Because if you look to please yourself only, you will miss God and God's life changing you. But if you give away your life to God and to others, you will find life.

The irony is that when you try to save your life and save up your possessions, as if this life belonged solely to you, you wind up losing your life and losing your possessions. But if you give it away to Jesus, you have something you cannot lose. If you give away your life to Jesus' good news message and lifestyle, if you desire what he has for you more than everything else, then you will have more life than you can contain, and others will see it too. We are so much more than our possessions, our money, our reputations, and our power.

We are followers of Jesus. We should not be ashamed of him. More and more it is culturally unacceptable in Canada to be a Jesus follower, a fan of his. There are so many other spiritual options out there. But we believe, I believe the Bible that tells us that Jesus gives us life. Week by week we come back to this fact. Week by week we come back to the simplicity of saying "yes" to the Lord, and saying "have your way in my life, Lord, not mine."

As we humble ourselves before God, we must be ready for new ventures, new journeys, new identities, new experiences of life in God. Some of you will be asked in the next week if you will agree with the call of God through the congregation and the Session for you to join us as an elder, as a church leader here. You may not see yourself as such. You may not see yourself as worthy. But God's call may be coming to you. You need to prayerfully prepare yourself. All of us who have come to this leadership office, have come in fear and trembling. This is a high calling, and it is demanding, not easy or light. Yet God lifts up leaders from the group to help us go forward

in his ways. Don't be afraid. Come forward into God's new challenge for you. Grow with us. Learn with us.

And of course, we want everyone here to be offering their desires, their passions, their highest interest back to the one who created life, who engineered our bodies, who places the physics of the universe in place. We want you to say "yes" to God in the deepest places of who you are.

As you agree to this, ask God to reveal to you where your passions reside, where your deepest desires are stirred, where your dreams are formed, where hopes and vision for the best life are created. We need help. I need help to have God at the center of who I am, not just the periphery, not just as another minor or major social activity.

Lent is a time where our desires are weighed. It would be nice if we had desireometers, machines that told us what we desire, and ordered the top ten desires so we could observe them and analyze them. The closest thing I have heard to such a desireometer is the Compass that points you to what your heart truly desires, from the movie, *Pirates of the Caribbean*. For pirates, it is gold and treasure. If you had such a compass where would it point in your life?

Such a question points to our interior lives where only God and sometimes we know what's going on. We have our interior lives, full of our public and private thoughts, which together with what we do make up who we are. This Lent, let us ask God anew to tell us who we are, that we might live out that identity and be transformed into the best we can be.

Let us pray.